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Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming
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role-playing games (RPGs)
Role-playing games (RPGs) have a complex history rooted in fantasy literature, interactive storytelling, and miniature **war** games. The first role-playing games were of the tabletop (also known as pen-and-paper) variety, meaning that they are typically played together by a small team, headed by a game-master. *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*; Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, 1974) was the first commercial role-playing game and a major influence on the development of the genre. In role-playing games, players each adopt the roles and control the actions of their own fictional characters (player-characters [PCs]), living in a fictional game **world**, and the game-master describes the world and the actions of **nonplayer characters (NPCs)**. Much of the conflict **resolution**, such as battle events or tests of skill, is conducted according to a set of **rules** and a random element, arbitrated by the use of many-sided dice. Character sheets, rulebooks, and other materials may be used to facilitate **play**, and there are many individual styles of role-playing, some of them more free-form, some more rules oriented. There also exists a version of RPG known as "larp," or live action role-playing, which might involve acting in character, wearing period costumes, and doing more or less location propping.
Computer role-playing games were partially derived from tabletop RPGs, although
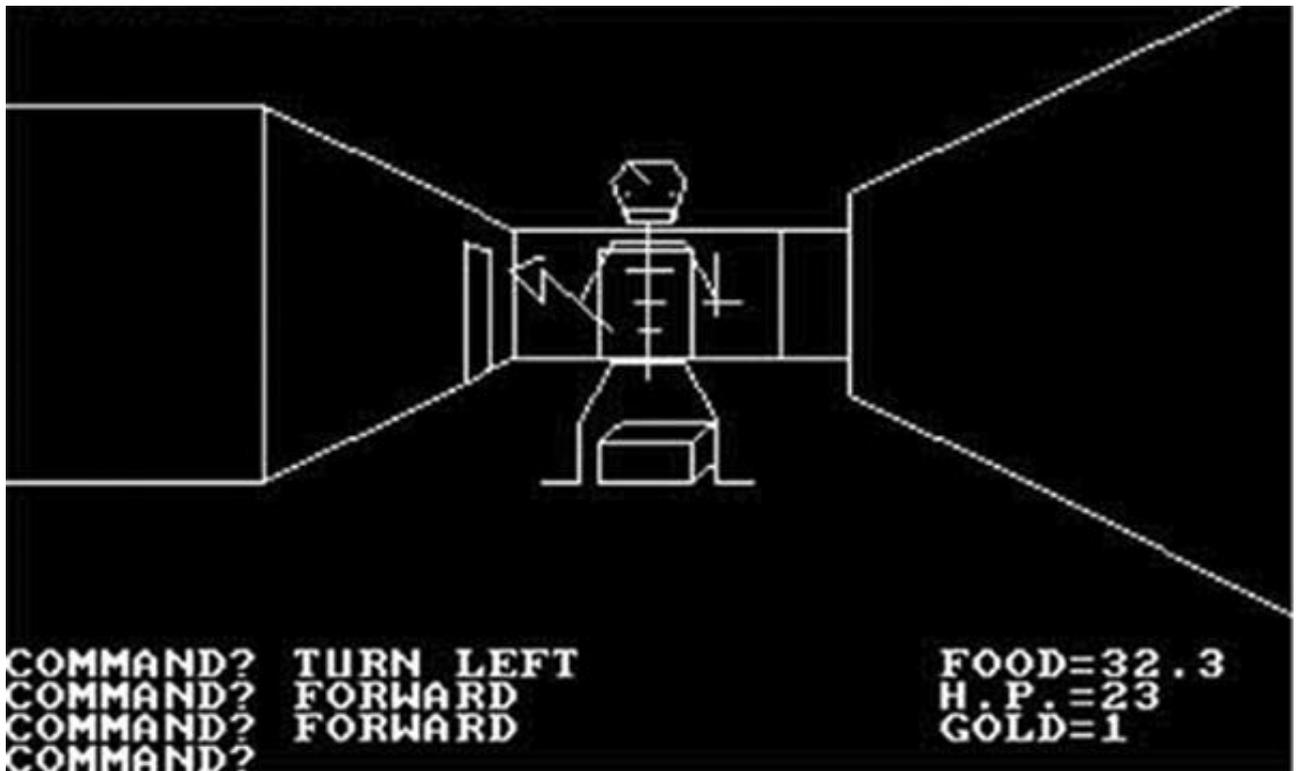

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there were also other influences and close ties to the development of such game genres as text adventures and computer **strategy games**. It is somewhat debatable what makes a "genuine" computer RPG; one feature that is commonly considered a defining one is that all RPGs have player-characters with quantifiable features (digital equivalents of the character sheets used in tabletop style RPGs), and character progression is used as a central measurement of success. Traditional RPG rule systems often include "experience levels," meaning that successful advancement in games translates into "experience points" through which a PC can "level up" to new powers and skills. Other skill and training systems may be used, but the focus on improving one's PC nevertheless remains one of the typical features of computer and **console** RPGs. Regardless of formal similarities, a single-player digital RPG is a very different experience from that provided by traditional tabletop RPGs. The element of "playing a role" or acting in character is largely lost, and instead various puzzles or quest structures (tasks assigned to a player-character) are used to guide the player through plot-driven gameplay.
Some of the most popular computer RPG series include the *Ultima* **series** (started with *Akalabeth*, 1979), *Wizardry* series (1981–2001), and *Might and Magic* series (1986–2002). These were preceded in the 1970s by early "dungeon crawl" style games that were often created for university computer systems, like *dnd* (Gary Whisenhunt and Ray Wood, 1974–1975) for PLATO at the University of Illinois, and *Rogue* (1980). Mostly text-only, these games were implemented as a digital translation of the core elements in *Dungeons & Dragons* gameplay: a player creates an adventuring character and then proceeds to explore some caves filled with monsters and treasure. Computer RPGs became increasingly complex during the 1980s and 1990s, with expanding game worlds and improving graphical as well

as audio features. These increasingly complex computer RPGs provided players with richer interaction options by handing them an entire team of adventurers to control, rather than a single player-character. Video games spun off on their own evolutionary track in the early 1980s, with the release of console RPGs, such as *Dragonstomper* (1982) for the **Atari VCS 2600** and *Dragon Quest* (1986) for the **Nintendo Entertainment System (NES)**, with gameplay based on models set by early *Ultima* and *Wizardry* games, combining turn-based battles with a heavy emphasis on **narrative** and character development. There exist today several national or cultural varieties of RPG **game design**, of which the contrast between the linear Japanese RPGs and Western open-ended RPGs is a prominent example.

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COMMAND?  TURN LEFT          FOOD=32.3
COMMAND?  FORWARD            H.P.=23
COMMAND?  FORWARD            GOLD=1
COMMAND?
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Akalabeth (Richard Garriott, 1979) [top] and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) [bottom]. (Frans Mäyrä)

Multiplayer computer RPG gameplay was first implemented in early multiplayer dungeon crawls, such as *Avatar* (1977–1979) in the PLATO system. The first multiplayer RPG with a persistent virtual world was *MUD* (Multi-User Dungeon) created by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle in 1978–1980. Combined with a graphical interface, MUDs later evolved to massively **multiplayer on-line role-playing games (MMORPGs)**, of which ***World of Warcraft*** (2004) is the most popular contemporary example. A subgenre of action RPGs has also evolved in which all game events are acted out in real time. For example, in

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Diablo (1996), the debt to early *Rogue*-like dungeon games is clear, the most important shared element being the randomly generated dungeon levels. When adapted into a multiplayer game, this kind of action RPG is also suitable for competitive tournament play. Single-player RPGs still remain popular, including several game series with richly detailed fictional and narrative worlds, including *Fallout* (1997), *Baldur's Gate* (1998), *Neverwinter Nights* (2002), *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), *Fable* (2004), and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011).

The essence or "true" character of RPGs is frequently debated by fans of the genre. Some emphasize the primacy of role-play; some, the gameplay element. Already the early *D&D* adventure scenarios were often designed and played out in a conflict-oriented "hack-and-slash" style, where the battles were the core element, and **immersion** into player-character was considered secondary. Some players had different priorities, and thus potential for disagreement existed as to what the goal and purpose of role-playing games was. One prominent formulation of these views was developed by the RPG community in an on-line discussion (in the rec.games.frp.advocacy Usenet news group) and later published by John H. Kim as "The Threeway Model" (1998). This model distinguishes between three popular styles of role-playing: a "dramatist" is playing the game to produce a satisfying storyline; a "gamist" player is focused on overcoming satisfying challenges; and finally, a "simulationist" is someone who emphasizes the internal consistency of events within the world of the game. This last RPG player category later became known as the "immersionist," where the emphasis is on the player getting involved with the lives of fictional RPG characters, even feeling their characters' feelings. In comparison, Richard Bartle (1996) has analyzed how the main player types in MUDs form four distinctive categories: achievers (who play to master the game), explorers (who play to experience the game world), socializers (who play to interact with other people), and killers (who want to use their powers to humiliate other people).

The designers and producers of computer RPGs can be seen to cater to this diversity of player preferences in various ways. The *Diablo* (1997) style of action RPGs focuses on battles and equipment and thus best serves players with "gamist" or "achiever" priorities in gameplay. Most of the popular computer RPGs such as *Mass Effect* (2007) and the other popular single-player RPG series mentioned earlier combine action, puzzle, and narrative elements in a manner that makes them appeal to a broad range of different kinds of players. In addition, as genre features have started to mix, RPGs often have the traits found in many kinds of games, rather than those of a separate genre of its own. For example, the popular "sandbox" style games such as the **Grand Theft Auto** series also include evolving player-characters, rich interactions with numerous NPCs, and quest (task) structures much in the style of single-player RPGs. There are some clear overlaps or mutual influences as well when the development of strategy games is considered, with *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* (2002) an example of a war game that includes individual, evolving

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"hero" characters as well as nonindividualized troop units. **Adventure games** also continue to have many similarities with RPGs in the story-driven character of gameplay in particular, but, however, they do not focus on player-created characters to the same degree. It should be noted that the on-line RPG space has also continued to expand with the introduction of virtual worlds such as Second Life (2003) or *Habbo Hotel* (2000; now *Habbo*). Many of these environments do away with gameplay elements entirely, becoming purely graphical chat services. The combination of gameplay challenges, fictional worlds and characters, plus on-line social interactions with real other people nevertheless provides a rich blend of attractions helping on-line role-playing games remain popular. Another contemporary development is the expansion of RPG style features into social networking services such as Facebook, where casual versions of RPGs have been released and marketed as "social games."

Frans Mäyrä

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